

# **Communiversity**

## **Parent Engagement in Education: Minneapolis Public Schools**

**Prepared in partnership with**  
Minneapolis Parent Information Center

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## **Executive Summary**

The Minneapolis Parent Information Center (MPIC) is a resource center that provides information, advocacy and assistance for children's education choices. MPIC serves families with children grades K-12, living and attending schools within the Minneapolis Public School district. The Center offers a variety of educational, academic support, and enrichment options. Some of the main functions of the MPIC is to advocate support to parents and students when intervention is necessary, build and bridge relationships with parents through schools, churches, and communities, provide on-site homework support for students (K-12), provide an on-site computer lab that is available for students and parents, and provide resources for families in need.

MPIC applied for a CURA grant to learn more about parent engagement in education. The goals of this research study are to collect data from previous surveys to frame and define the concept of 'parent engagement', to gather information about the barriers that parents face in engaging with their children's education, and to determine ways to increase parent engagement. This information will help MPIC to better design programming to engage, recruit, and motivate parent participation within the Minneapolis Public School system.

Data collection consisted of administering a written survey to parents and grandparents of children enrolled or previously enrolled in the Minneapolis Public School system. An hour-long focus group was also conducted with a group of grandparents that are raising their grandchildren who meet at MPIC regularly. Data analysis of the written survey consisted of computing percentages for responses

chosen by the participants. The focus group discussion was carefully recorded and responses were coded in order to illuminate significant themes.

Analysis showed that parents and grandparents believe parent engagement is important and can make a difference in their child's education. Parents are already checking in about and praising their child's school performance. Trends from the focus group discussion show that parents are designating time for homework and helping their children with their homework on a regular basis. Our findings also validate that transportation and work schedules are, in fact, major barriers to parental involvement in education as indicated in Lontos's chapter in the manuscript *At Risk Families & Schools-Becoming Partners* (1992). Furthermore, we found a trend in the literature away from the term 'parent involvement' to the term 'parent engagement'. Research shows that the term 'engagement' has a deeper sense of parental ownership and commitment while 'involvement' suggests a lower level of participation.

Based on the literature and our findings, MPIC should focus its programming on reducing the barriers that prevent parents from becoming engaged in their child's education and building on the engagement strategies that parents are already employing in their homes. MPIC should collaborate with the Minneapolis Public schools to bring attention to the barriers that parents have identified such as transportation and work schedules. In addition, based on our findings that parents are already doing things in the home to support their children's education, programming at MPIC should focus on enhancing what parents are already doing in the homes and engaging with parents about what more they can do.

## **Description of Project**

### *Context*

Parents are the first educators of their children. As school districts struggle to educate children in urban communities, they are forgetting the role and influence of the parent in the success of the child. The Minneapolis Public Schools are striving to provide a quality education for children in their district but cannot do so without the help of the parents. MPIC would like to investigate the barriers these parents face in engaging with their child's education. The information gathered from this research project will guide the programming at MPIC to engage, recruit, and motivate parent participation within the Minneapolis Public School system.

### *Project Goals*

This project has three main goals:

- 1) Collect data/results from previous surveys to frame/define parent engagement
- 2) Determine obstacles for parents to engage in their child's education
- 3) Determine ways to increase parent engagement

## Literature Review

An extensive search for parent engagement research in the Minneapolis area produced very little results. The Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (REA) Department of the Minneapolis Public Schools confirmed that virtually no research has been done within the district on the topic of parent engagement. However, after speaking to Dr. Hedy Walls, formerly from the Office of Family Engagement in the Minneapolis Public Schools, we learned of an unpublished study that was conducted in 2007 on the topic of parent engagement. The study, entitled *North Side Minneapolis Public Schools: African American Family Involvement*, assessed African American family engagement in North Side Minneapolis schools. A series of focus groups were conducted to gather opinions of and reactions to an opportunity to establish a partnership between African American families of North Side students, their schools, Minneapolis Public Schools, and the community, in an effort to aid Minneapolis Public Schools in optimizing African American family involvement in the North Side schools. They found that the family members represented in their focus groups clearly wished to engage as partners with the Minneapolis Public Schools in communication, volunteering, and parenting. They highlighted the importance of organizing parents as partners, establishing an understanding of family engagement and increasing access to students' learning process.

This study utilized Joyce Epstein's six types of family involvement, which are 1) parenting, 2) communication, 3) volunteering, 4) learning at home, 5) decision making, and 6) collaborating with the community. The Minneapolis Public schools have embraced Epstein's model as a way to build partnerships with parents.

Because these types of family involvement have been supported by research, we incorporated many of them into our survey and focus group questions.

Furthermore, this study, as well as the research conducted by Sandy Christianson, specifically addresses the trend away from the term 'parent involvement' to the term 'parent engagement'. The findings show that 'engagement' has a deeper sense of parental ownership and commitment versus 'involvement' suggests a lower level of participation.

We also looked more generally for research that identified barriers to parent engagement in education. In Chapter 6 of the manuscript *At Risk Families & Schools-Becoming Partners* (1992), Lontos identifies several barriers to parental engagement in education. Barriers for parents included 1) feelings of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth, 2) negative attitudes or bad experiences with schools, 3) suspicion or anger that schools are not treating them equally, 4) leave it to the schools, 5) cultural and language barriers, 6) economic, emotional, or time constraints, and 7) logistical problems such as childcare, transportation, and scheduling.



## **Research Methodology**

### *Research Design*

Data for this project was collected in the form of a paper survey and a focus group discussion. The survey and focus group questions were developed based on the barriers and misunderstandings identified in Lontos's chapter in the manuscript *At Risk Families & Schools-Becoming Partners* (1992).

The survey was administered to parents and grandparents of children enrolled or previously enrolled in the Minneapolis Public School system. Nine surveys were completed by members of a grandparent group that meets regularly at MPIC. Nine surveys were completed at a meeting of parents pulled together for a specific discussion regarding the new design for North High School in North Minneapolis. This group consisted of a blend of teachers and parents, two grandparents, one mother and one father. An additional three surveys were completed over the phone with members of the grandparent group who were unable to attend the scheduled meeting. The educational background of the respondents was mixed, with two respondents not finishing high school, five having a high school diploma, seven completing some college, four having a college degree and three possessing graduate degrees. The children of the respondents ranged from elementary to high school age and almost three fourths (71.4 percent) of the children receive free or reduced lunch.

The one-hour focus group took place on Thursday, November 5, 2009 at MPIC. The population consists of nine grandparents whose grandchildren currently attend or previously attended schools within the Minneapolis Public School district. The

focus group was digitally recorded, and handwritten notes were taken. Dinner was provided to the participants prior to the start of the focus group.

Following the focus group session, the note-taker typed notes based on session recordings and handwritten notes. The data analysis process included extensive review of typed notes and session transcription and summarization of ideas based on common responses to the questions asked by the facilitator.

### *Limitations*

The main limitation with this research design is the small sample size of participants who completed the written survey. We can only draw conclusions about these particular individuals, and are not able to generalize our results to the larger population of parents in the Minneapolis Public School district. In addition, the focus group was conducted with a group of grandparents that meets regularly at the MPIC to gain support from one another about their grandchildren's educational attainment. This group of grandparents may be considered "engaged" and may not accurately represent the opinions of "average" families or of families who are not involved in Minneapolis Public Schools or their children's education. And finally, though the main population the MPIC was interested in learning about was African American families in North Minneapolis, not all participants who filled out the written survey or those who participated in the focus group were African American.

## Analysis

### Survey Results

Below are the results and analysis for individual questions included in the MPIC Parent Engagement Survey.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total Response		
Q.1a I would like to become more involved in my child's education but I do not know how.	1 4.76%	5 23.81%	4 19.05%	7 33.33%	4 19.05%	21		
Q.1b I believe my child's school teacher/staff has my child's best interest in mind, related to his/her education.	0 0.00%	1 4.76%	10 47.62%	8 38.10%	2 9.52%	21		
Q.1c I believe education is the teacher's job, not the parents'.	10 47.62%	9 42.86%	1 4.76%	1 4.76%	0 0.00%	21		
Q.1d I feel it is best to stay away from my child's school and let the teacher do his/her job.	9 42.86%	12 57.14%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	21		
	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	1x/School Year	2x/School Year	Rarely	Never	Total Response
Q.2a How often do you talk with your child's teacher in person, or through letter,	6	8	5	2	0	0	0	21

phone or email?								
	28.57%	38.10%	23.81%	9.52%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	
1.2b How often do you talk with your child about his/her school performance?								21
	10	8	2	1	0	0	0	
	47.62%	38.10%	9.52%	4.76%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	
1.2c How often do you praise your child's school performance?								21
	11	6	4	0	0	0	0	
	52.38%	28.57%	19.05%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	
1.2d How often do you attend school sponsored events, conferences, or open houses?								14
	0	1	6	4	2	1	0	
	0.00%	7.14%	42.86%	28.57%	14.29%	7.14%	0.00%	
	All of the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	Never				Total Response:
1.3 Do you feel your child is getting a good education?								21
	2	13	6	0				
	9.52%	61.90%	28.57%	0.00%				
	Better	Same	Worse				Total Response:	
1.4 How would you compare your school experience to your child's experience?								21
	10	8	3					
	47.62%	38.10%	14.29%					

	I feel welcomed	Teacher/staff want my child to succeed	I feel comfortable	Teachers/staff respectful to students	Teachers/staff respectful to parents	School handles problems	Total Response:
Q.5 Which of the following is true about your child's school (check all that apply)	13 16.46%	15 18.99%	16 20.25%	12 15.19%	16 20.25%	7 8.86%	79
	No interest	Childcare	Transportation	Work schedule	Family obligations	Other	Total Response:
Q.6 Check any reasons you are unable to attend school events (check all that apply)	1 3.13%	5 15.63%	8 25.00%	9 28.13%	5 15.63%	4 12.50%	32
	Weekly	Monthly	1x/School Year	2x/School Year	Rarely	Never	Total Response:
Q.7 How often do you think you would attend school events if the obstacles in your life were removed?	9 47.37%	10 52.63%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	19

	Some high school	High school diploma	Some college	College degree	Graduate degree	Total Response:	
9.8 What is your education level?	2 9.52%	5 23.81%	7 33.33%	4 19.05%	3 14.29%	21	
	Elementary School	Middle School	High School				Total Response:
9.9 What are the ages of your school age children?	10 34.48%	7 24.14%	12 41.38%				29
	Yes	No					Total Response:
9.10 Does your child receive free or reduced lunch?	15 71.43%	6 28.57%					21

The written survey gave us a greater understanding of what parents and grandparents think about parent engagement in education and what kinds of things they were already doing in their homes to engage with their child’s education. 90.5 percent of participants disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that education is the teacher’s job, not the parents’. Furthermore, all respondents disagreed with the statement “I believe it is best to stay away from the school and let the teacher do his/her job”. Thus, it is clear that these parents and grandparents believe parent

engagement is important and can make a difference in their child's education. A majority of respondents also talk to and praise their children about their school performance on a daily or weekly basis. Another positive finding is that parents believe the experiences that their children are having in the Minneapolis Public schools is better (47.6%) or the same (38.1%) as the experiences they had in school.

We also learned about the barriers parents and grandparents face in engaging in their child's education. The main reasons that parents are unable to attend school events are transportation and their work schedule. If these and other barriers such as childcare and family obligations were removed, parents reported that they would attend school events on a weekly (47.4 percent) or monthly (52.6 percent) basis.

#### *Focus Group Themes*

Below is a summary of the main themes from focus group discussion:

***F2 discussion: Can you tell me about your personal experience in elementary, middle school, and/or high school? Is your child having similar/different experiences?***

When many of the participants were in school, respect for teachers, and elders in general, was a high priority. They were not rewarded as much as kids today. However, they did get praised in school, which raised their self-esteem. Safety was also less of a concern back then. The experiences that students are having today are different. Children do not understand what respect means. They want to feel respected before they show respect back. Parents let kids get away with things at home and then the children bring these behaviors to the school. Now, kids get rewarded with sugar/candy for things they should be doing anyway. Kids also blame others instead of taking responsibility for their own actions. Safety is

also more of a concern now. Many students have to go through metal detectors when they enter school now, which is not conducive to learning.

***F3 discussion: What has been your experience talking with school staff, teachers, and counselors about your child's school performance?***

Some grandparents are having great experiences. The teachers and staff listen to the parents and the parents listen to the teachers and staff. The schools focus on openness with good and bad feedback about the students.

***F4 discussion: Thinking about the parent/teacher relationship, do you think the teacher should make the first contact? If yes, what format: letter home, phone call, email, home visit, conference, open house? How often should the teacher initiate contact during the school year? When should the parent contact the teacher/school?***

Parents should make the first contact. It is good to contact the school, introduce yourself, say you will be involved, and come to the school. Teachers have many students to deal with. One participant talked about her grandson's school and how it is mandatory for parents to be involved. They must be involved at least 20 hours throughout the year. Another participant talked about a program at her grandchild's school called core families. These core families keep in contact with other parents and tell them what is going on at school. Another participant attended an open house at her child's school and saw that attendance was very low. She was one of three families who attended. And finally, one participant made suggestions to a teacher whose class was out of control. She went into the classroom and helped out. She also took pictures of the kids and put them on their folders. She was teaching the teacher.

***F4 discussion: What do you view as the role of the teacher? Parent? I am going to list roles and ask you to assign teacher, parent or both: educator, disciplinarian, coach, encourager, and enforcer.***



Teachers need to have a good knowledge of the child and his or her learning style. Some teachers are just in it for the teaching, not the children.

***F7 discussion: What could the schools do to increase your attendance at school events?***

Participants felt they already responded to this question within other questions and thus no discussion was generated here.

***F6 discussion: Are you able to create a home environment that promotes, supports, encourages your child to do well in school? Can you give examples? Can you express what you'd like your home environment to be?***

Many grandparents have a routine where homework comes first before anything else. Sometimes the TV is on while the kids are doing their homework. Some of the kids complete their homework on the bus. The grandparents also check their grandchildren's homework. When kids get older, they think they can do it themselves but some kids can't take the responsibility. When kids do not get their homework done, some of the grandparents take away their TV privileges.

The grandparents also had a discussion about their grandkids not turning in their homework. The grandparents feel this is disrespectful because they take the time to help them with their homework and then they don't turn it in or say they don't know where it is. They wondered why the kids would complete the assignments but not turn them in. Do the children think they didn't do it right? Sometimes teachers do not collect the homework or expect students to put their homework in the basket at the front of the room. Other students don't turn in their homework because their peers don't. Peers also become more important and they want to please their peers, not their parents. At school, kids put up a front. This has

to do with the child finding out who he is, going through puberty and exerting independence.

Some of the grandchildren say they don't have any homework or don't know if they have any or not. They also say that they forgot it at school or lost it. The grandparents go through their grandchildren's backpacks. Kids get used to praise and when they get older, they expect it. If they don't get it, they do not do their work. Also, many grandparents are raising their grandchildren these days. The children may be embarrassed to say they are not living with their parents, who they miss and love. They may act up; get sick, angry, depressed, and sad. The parent influence is important to the child's psychological development. Also, kids today have much more to deal with. It is so different raising their grandkids than their own kids. The kids face parental problems, peers, wanting to fit in, do what others are doing, etc.

***F1 discussion: What kinds of support would you need from the school in order to become more involved?***

One grandparent talked about the importance of education and social services working together. The schools need to have social services connect with parents. This woman was involved in a program called N.E.S.T with Dr. Carter at Way to Grow. They found out that students come into kindergarten already expected to fail based on assessments. This program taught parents how to teach their children. This same approach needs to be applied to education. If children act up at school it is triggered by problems at home. They may be in abusive households, without electricity, food, etc. Schools need to connect with social

services to work with parents to solve problems with kids. They talked about putting the village back together- the village is fractured.

Another grandparent said that not all homes are broken. Drugs also affect children's brain development if the parents were taking drugs during pregnancy. This may lead to behavior problems at school. One of the grandchildren has an attachment disorder. He is respectful at home but out of control at school. This is because he is secure at home but not at school. Changes are hard for him. Labels such as "problem child" also affect the relationship with school. Another child just switched to a new elementary school where he is having good experiences now. He was not doing well at Minneapolis Public Schools. At his new school, they work with parents, teachers, social workers, parent support groups, etc. This grandparent is really impressed with this program.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

After an extensive review of the literature, we found that little research has been done on the topic of parent engagement in education in the Minneapolis area. This lack of prior knowledge on the topic made this current study even more valuable to MPIC. We did find a trend in the literature away from the term 'parent involvement' to the term 'parent engagement'. Engagement has a deeper sense of parental ownership and committed while involvement suggests a lower level of participation.

In the manuscript *At Risk Families & Schools- Becoming Partners*, Liontos identifies several barriers to parental involvement in education. Our research found consistent themes of work schedules and transportation as the main barriers to attending school events for parents and grandparents.

Based on the findings from our written survey and feedback from participants in the focus group discussion, the task of increasing parent engagement includes supporting and encouraging positive parenting, creating at home learning environments and open, consistent, strong communication between schools and families. MPIC should focus its programming on reducing the barriers that prevent parents from becoming engaged in their child's education and emphasize the engagement strategies that parents are already employing in the homes. MPIC should collaborate with the Minneapolis Public schools to bring attention to the barriers that parents have identified such as transportation and work schedules. In addition, programming at MPIC should focus on enhancing what parents are already doing in the homes.

Additional research must be conducted with a wider population of parents in the Minneapolis Public School district to fully understand the factors that impede parent engagement in education. While this study is a great introduction to the topic, much is still unknown about parent engagement in Minneapolis and needs to be further explored.

## Appendix A

### Parent Engagement Survey

*1. Please check the box that applies to you:*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
<b>1a. I would like to become more involved in my child's education but I do not know how.</b>					
<b>1b. I believe my child's school teacher/staff has my child's best interest in mind, related to his/her education.</b>					
<b>1c. I believe education is the teacher's job, not the parents'.</b>					
<b>1d. I feel it is best to stay away from my child's school and let the teacher do his/her job.</b>					

*2. How often do you do the following things?*

	Weekly	Monthly	1x/School Year	2x/School Year	Rarely	Never
<b>2a. How often do you talk with your child's teacher in person, or through letter, phone, or email?</b>						
<b>2b. How often do you talk with your child about his/her school performance?</b>						
<b>2c. How often do you praise your child's school performance?</b>						

<b>2d. How often do you attend school sponsored events, conferences, or open houses?</b>						
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--	--	--	--	--	--

**3. Do you feel your child is getting a good education?**

- ☐ All of the time
- ☐ Most of the time
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Never

**4. How would you compare your school experience to your child's experience?**

- ☐ Better
- ☐ Same
- ☐ Worse

**5. Which of the following is true about your child's school (check all that apply).**

- ☐ I feel welcomed when I go to the school
- ☐ Teacher/staff wants my child to succeed
- ☐ I feel comfortable asking questions of teachers/staff
- ☐ Teachers/staff are respectful to students
- ☐ Teachers/staff are respectful to parents
- ☐ The school handles problems within the school right away

**6. Check any reasons you are unable to attend school events (check all that apply).**

- ☐ No interest
- ☐ Childcare
- ☐ Transportation

- ☐ Work schedule
- ☐ Family obligations
- ☐ Other

Please specify:

***7. How often do you think you would attend school events if the obstacles in your life were removed?***

- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ 1x/school year
- ☐ 2x/school year
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never

***8. What is your education level?***

- ☐ Some high school
- ☐ High school diploma
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ College degree
- ☐ Graduate degree

***9. What are the ages of your school age children?***

- ☐ Elementary School
- ☐ Middle School
- ☐ High School



***10. Does your child receive free or reduced lunch?***

☐ Yes

☐ No

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Questions

F2 discussion: Can you tell me about your personal experience in elementary, middle school and/or high school? Is your child having similar/different experiences?

F3 discussion: What has been your experience talking with school staff, teachers, and counselors about your child's school performance?

F4 discussion: Thinking about the parent/teacher relationship, do you think the teacher should make the first contact? If yes, what format: letter home, phone call, email, home visit, conference, open house? How often should the teacher initiate contact during the school year? When should the parent contact the teacher/school?

F4 discussion: What do you view as the role of the teacher? Parent? I am going to list roles and ask you to assign either teacher, parent or both:

Educator, Disciplinarian, Coach, Encourager, Enforcer

F7 discussion: What could the schools do to increase your attendance at school events?

*Suggestions only if lack of response: when is a good time, giveaways, separate parents/childcare, non school location...*

F6 discussion: Are you able to create a home environment that promotes, supports, encourages your child to do well in school? Can you give examples? Can you express what you'd like your home environment to be?

F1 discussion: What kinds of support would you need from the school in order to become more involved?

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